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The Old and the New Eastern State Hospital in Lexington, Kentucky

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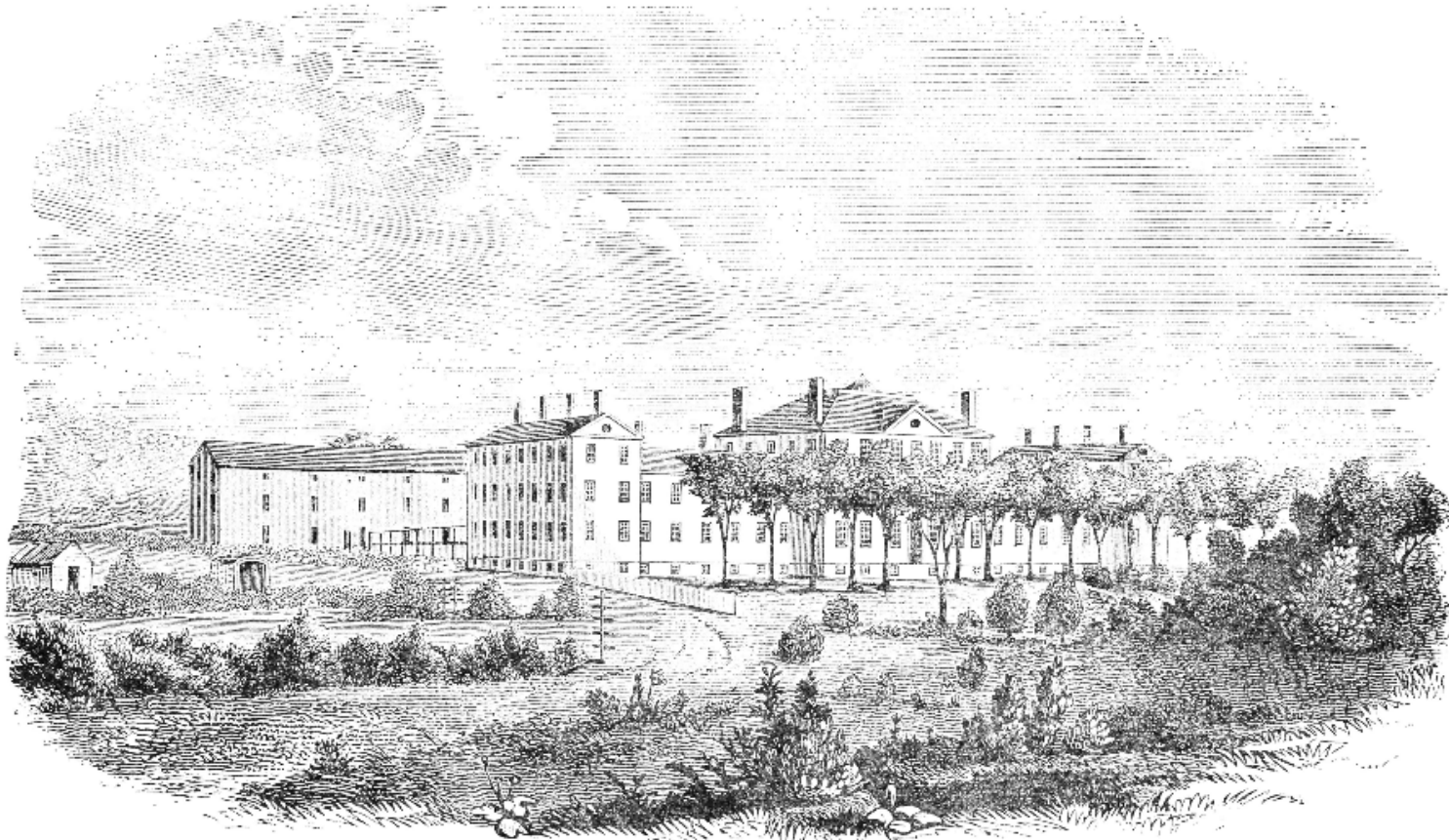
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(EASTERN) LUNATIC ASYLUM, LEXINGTON, KY., IN 1846.
(Partially Destroyed by fire, Feb. 15, 1852; Re-built and Enlarged.)



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In 1766 the first US public psychiatric hospital, Eastern State Hospital, was opened in Williamsburg, Virginia. Another Eastern State Hospital (Figure 1) has continuously functioned in Lexington, Kentucky, since 1824. After nearly two centuries, a new a state-of-the-art patient-centered hospital (Figure 2) will open this fall.

In the late 1700s, Kentuckians who developed severe mental illness were sent to Williamsburg. In 1816, a group of public-spirited citizens in Lexington planned for a hospital for the poor, disabled and “lunatic” members of society. In 1822, the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Kentucky passed an “Act to Establish a Lunatic Asylum”. Ten acres of land, along with the unfinished hospital building, were purchased and thus the second oldest state mental hospital in the US was established.¹ After the opening in 1824, the name changed several times, but become Eastern State Hospital in 1912.

Lexington’s Eastern State Hospital included a 400-acre farm and was an isolated institution, separate from the surrounding community. Many employees lived on the grounds in cottages, dormitories, separate rooms in the main hospital building, or on wards with the residents. The hospital residents and staff grew and prepared most of the food consumed. A dedicated train station provided the remaining food, supplies and coal for the on-site boilers. In 1956, over 300 acres of the farm were sold to IBM and later became Lexmark. As late as 1967, the hospital had 1000 patients in residence. In the 1990s, the few remaining long-term patients were progressively discharged and the hospital became solely an acute psychiatric hospital, serving 1600-2000 admissions/year from a catchment area in central and northern Kentucky. In 1995, the state asked the Bluegrass Regional Mental Health/Mental Retardation Board, which was operating community mental health centers, to run the hospital as well.

Lexington's third century of public psychiatric care will begin in a scenic new location less than a mile from the original location. A land swap was proposed in 2008 among the state, Bluegrass Community and Technical College (BCTC), and the University of Kentucky (UK). The old Eastern State Hospital grounds, including the administration building, are being transferred to BCTC. The main administrative building and a laundry building will be preserved. UK provided the 30-acre new site to build the new hospital.

References

1. Collins L. *History of Kentucky*. Volume II. Frankfort, KY, Kentucky Historical Society, 1966.